RECORDS OF THE GRAND HISTORIAN: HAN DYNASTY II

REVISED EDITION

By Sima Qian

Translated by Burton Watson

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SHI JI 125: THE BIOGRAPHIES OF THE EMPERORS' MALE FAVOURITES

Those who served the ruler and succeeded in delighting his ears and eyes, those who caught their lord's fancy and won his favour and intimacy, did so not only through the power of lust and love; each had certain abilities in which he excelled. Thus I made "The Biographies of the Emperors' Male Favourites".

The proverb says, "No amount of toiling in the fields can compare to a spell of good weather; no amount of faithful service can compare to being liked by your superiors." This is no idle saying. Yet it is not women alone who can use their looks to attract the eyes of the ruler; courtiers and eunuchs can play at that game as well. Many were the men of ancient times who gained favour in this way.

When the Han arose, Emperor Gaozu, for all his coarseness and blunt manners, was won by the charms of a young boy named Ji, and Emperor Hui had a boy favourite named Hong. Neither Ji nor Hong had any particular talent or ability; both won prominence simply by their looks and graces. Day and night they were by the ruler's side, and all the high ministers were obliged to apply to them when they wished to speak to the emperor. As a result all the palace attendants at the court of Emperor Hui took to wearing caps with gaudy feathers and sashes of seashells and to painting their faces, transforming themselves into a veritable host of Jis and Hongs. Both young men were ordered to move from their native places and to take up residence at Anling, where Emperor Hui had his mausoleum.

The gentlemen who enjoyed favour in the palace under Emperor Wen included a courtier named Deng Tong and the eunuchs Zhao Tan and Beigong Bozi. Beigong Bozi was a worthy and affectionate man, while Zhao Tan attracted the emperor's attention by his skill in observing the stars and exhalations in the sky; both of them customarily rode about in the same carriage with Emperor Wen. Deng Tong does not seem to have had any special talent.

Deng Tong was a native of Nan'an in the province of Shu. Because he knew

how to pole a boat he was made a yellow-capped boatman in the grounds of the imperial palace.

Once Emperor Wen dreamed that he was trying to climb to Heaven but could not seem to make his way up. Just then a yellow-capped boatman boosted him from behind and he was able to reach Heaven. When the emperor turned around to look at the man, he noticed that the seam of the boatman's robe was split in the back just below the sash.

After the emperor awoke, he went to the Terrace of Lapping Water, which stood in the middle of the Azure Lake, and began to search furtively for the man who had boosted him up in his dream. There he saw Deng Tong, who happened to have a tear in the back of his robe exactly like that of the man in the dream. The emperor summoned him and asked his name, and when he learned that the man's family name was Deng (ascend) and his personal name Tong (reach), the emperor was overjoyed. From this time on, the emperor bestowed ever-increasing favour and honour upon Deng Tong.

Deng Tong for his part behaved with great honesty and circumspection in his new position. He cared nothing about mingling with people outside the palace and, though the emperor granted him holidays to return to his home, he was always reluctant to leave. As a result, the emperor showered him with gifts until his fortunes mounted to tens of billions of cash and he had been promoted to the post of superior lord. The emperor from time to time even paid visits to Deng Tong's home to amuse himself there.

Deng Tong, however, had no other talent than this of entertaining the emperor and was never able to do anything to advance others at court. Instead he bent all his efforts toward maintaining his own position and ingratiating himself with the emperor.

Once the emperor summoned a man who was skilled at physiognomizing and asked him to examine Deng Tong's face. "This man will become poor and die of starvation," the physiognomist announced. "But *I* am the one who has made him rich!" exclaimed the emperor. "How could he ever become poor?" With this, he presented Deng Tong with the rights to a range of copper-bearing mountains in Yandao in Shu Province and allowed him to mint copper coins for himself until the so-called Deng family cash were circulating all over the empire. Such was the wealth which Deng Tong acquired.

Once Emperor Wen was troubled by a tumour, and Deng Tong made it his duty to keep it sucked clean of infection. The emperor was feeling depressed by his illness and, apropos of nothing in particular, asked Deng Tong, "In all the

empire, who do you think loves me most?"

"Surely no one loves Your Majesty more than the heir apparent!" replied Deng Tong.

Later, when the heir apparent came to inquire how his father was, the emperor made him suck the tumour. The heir apparent managed to suck it clean, but it was obvious from his expression that he found the task distasteful. Afterward, when he learned that Deng Tong had been in the habit of sucking the tumour for the emperor, he was secretly filled with shame. From this time on he bore a grudge against Deng Tong.

After Emperor Wen passed away and the heir apparent, Emperor Jing, came to the throne, Deng Tong retired from court and returned to his home. He had not been there any time, however, when someone reported to the throne that he was guilty of smuggling cash which he had minted across the border to the barbarians. He was handed over to the law officials for investigation and it was found that the evidence for the most part supported the charges. In the end he was condemned and all of his fortune was confiscated by the government. Even so, it was claimed that his wealth was insufficient to cover the damages and that he still owed the government several hundred million more cash. Emperor Jing's older sister, the Elder Princess, presented Deng Tong with a gift of money, but the officials immediately seized this as well, until Deng Tong was not left with so much as a pin to hold his cap on. After this the Elder Princess provided him with food and clothing in the form of a loan so that it could not be confiscated. In the end Deng Tong did not have a single copper cash to call his own, and died as a dependent in someone else's home.

Emperor Jing did not have any particular favourites among the officials at his court. There was one man, a chief of palace attendants named Zhou Wenren, who enjoyed rather more favour than ordinary men, but even so it was nothing very extraordinary. Among the favourites of the present emperor were the courtier Hann Yan, the great grandson of Xin, the king of Hann, and the eunuch Li Yannian.

Hann Yan was an illegitimate grandson of Hann Tuidang, the marquis of Gonggao. When the present emperor was still king of Jiaodong, he and Yan studied writing together and the two grew very fond of each other. Later, after the emperor was appointed heir apparent, he became more and more friendly with Yan. Yan was skilful at riding and archery and was also very good at ingratiating himself with the emperor. He was well versed in the fighting techniques of the barbarians and therefore, after the emperor came to the throne

and began making plans to open attacks on the Xiongnu, he treated Yan with even greater respect and honour. Yan had soon advanced to the rank of superior lord and received as many gifts from the ruler as Deng Tong had in his days of honour.

At this time Yan was constantly by the emperor's side, both day and night. Once the emperor's younger brother Liu Fei, the king of Jiangdu, who had come to court to pay his respects, received permission from the emperor to accompany him on a hunt in the Shanglin Park. The order had already been given to clear the roads for the imperial carriage, but the emperor was not yet ready to depart, and so he sent Yan ahead in one of the attendant carriages, accompanied by fifty or 100 riders, to gallop through the park and observe the game. The king of Jiangdu, seeing the party approaching in the distance, supposed it was the emperor and ordered his own attendants off the road while he himself knelt down by the side of the road to greet the emperor. Yan, however, raced by without even noticing him, and after he had passed, when the king of Jiangdu realized his error, he was enraged and went to the empress dowager in tears. "I beg to return the kingdom which has been granted to me and become a bodyguard in the palace," he said. "Perhaps then I may be accorded as much honour as Hann Yan!" From this time on the empress dowager bore a grudge against Yan.

Because he attended the emperor, Hann Yan was allowed to come and go in the women's quarters of the palace and did not have to observe the customary prohibitions against entering them. Some time later, it was reported to the empress dowager that Yan had had an illicit affair with one of the women there. She was furious and immediately sent a messenger ordering him to take his life. Although the emperor attempted to make apologies for him, he was able to do nothing to change the order, and in the end Yan was forced to die. His younger brother Hann Yue, the marquis of Andao, also managed to win great favour with the emperor.

Li Yannian was a native of Zhongshan. His mother and father, as well as he and his brothers and sisters, were all originally singers. Li Yannian, having been convicted of some crime and condemned to castration, was made a keeper of the dogs in the palace. Later, the princess of Pingyang recommended his younger sister Lady Li to the emperor because of her skill in dancing. When the emperor saw her, he took a liking to her and had her installed in the women's quarters of the palace, at the same time summoning Li Yannian to an audience and appointing him to a higher post.

Li Yannian was a good singer and knew how to compose new tunes. At this

time the emperor wanted some hymns set to music and arranged with string accompaniment to be used in the sacrifices to Heaven and Earth which he had initiated. Li Yannian accepted the task and performed it to the emperor's satisfaction, composing melodies and string accompaniments for the new words that had been written. Meanwhile his sister, Lady Li, bore the emperor a son.

Li Yannian by this time wore the seals of a 2,000 picul official and bore the title of "Harmonizer of Tunes". Day and night he was by the emperor's side and his honour and favour equalled that which Hann Yan had formerly enjoyed.

When some years had passed, his younger brother Li Ji began carrying on an affair with one of the palace ladies and becoming more and more arrogant and careless in his behaviour.[1] After the death of Lady Li, the emperor's affection for the Li brothers waned, and he ended by having them arrested and executed.

From this time on, the courtiers who enjoyed special favour with the emperor were for the most part members of the families related to the emperor by marriage, but none of them are worth discussing here. Wei Qing and Huo Qubing, who were in-laws of the emperor, also won great honour and favour, but in their case their advancement was due primarily to their talents and abilities.

The Grand Historian remarks: How violent are the seasons of love and hatred! By observing the fate of Mi Zixia, we can guess what will happen to favourites of later times. "Even the future a hundred ages hence may be foretold!"[2]

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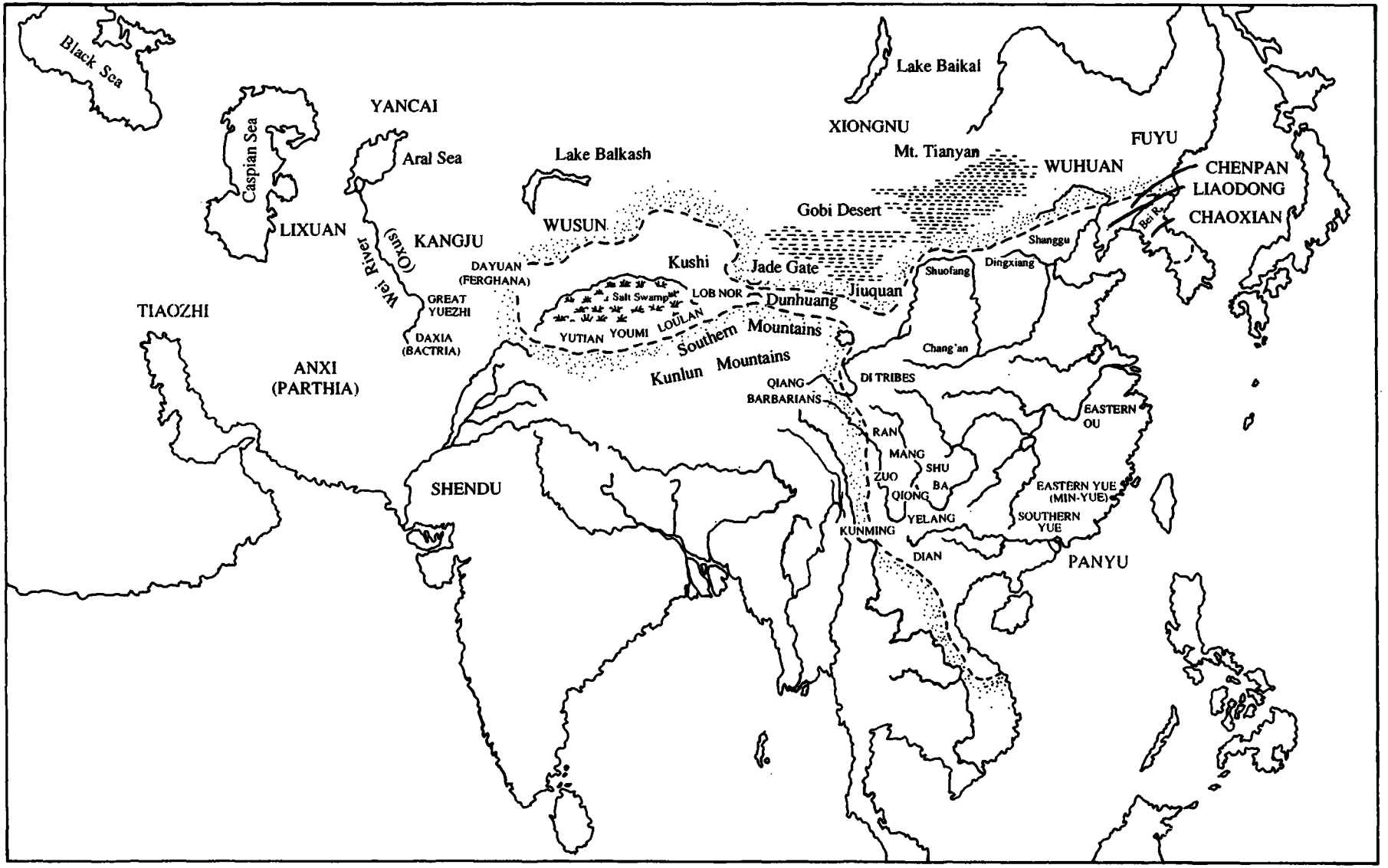
[1] Following the reading in *Han shu* 93. The *Shi ji* text reads as though Li Yannian himself were carrying on the affair, which would hardly be likely.

[2] The last sentence is a quotation from the *Analects* II, 23. The story of Mi Zixia is related by Han Fei Zi and is quoted in Han Fei Zi's biography in *Shi ji* 63. As it is told there, Mi Zixia was much loved by the lord of Wei in ancient times. Once when Mi Zixia heard that his mother was ill, he forged an order from the ruler and went to visit her in the royal carriage of Wei, though he knew that the penalty for such an action was amputation of the feet. The lord of Wei, however, simply praised the young man for his filial piety. Another time Mi Zixia was strolling in an orchard with the ruler and, biting into a peach and finding it tasty, he offered the remainder to his lord. "How deep is your love for me!" exclaimed the lord of Wei. "You forget your own appetite and think only of me!" Later, however, Mi Zixia's looks faded, and the ruler ceased to care for him and found some excuse to condemn him to punishment. "After all," said the lord of Wei, "he once stole my carriage, and another time he gave me a half-eaten peach to eat!"



CHINA AND ITS NEIGHBOURS IN THE FORMER HAN

Based on Yanai Watari, *Tōyō dokushi chizu* (Tokyo, Fuzambō, 1931), map 7. The dotted line indicates the extent of Han power under Emperor Wu. Names of countries and bodies of water not mentioned by Sima Qian and therefore probably unknown to him do not appear on this map. There is some doubt as to which part of India was meant by the Chinese name "Shendu".